

Duxbury Clipper

SECTION

B

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Section B

A Journey Down Surplus Street

PART I: IN THE BEGINNING...

Most visitors to Duxbury -- as well as some residents -- think of Washington Street as the oldest street in town. While no one denies the historic significance and beauty of this roadway, it came into existence more than 160 years after the town's first roads were laid in 1637 under the direction of the Colony. Those roads are considered Duxbury's first, and Surplus Street was among them. A path more than just dirt or gravel, it can lead to untold tales and historical treasures. By taking a journey down Surplus Street one can walk through more than 360 years of Duxbury history.



By DEBORA BABIN KATZ

The first roads of Duxbury were known as the Old Duxburrough Path of 1637. According to Colony Court records, the general court appointed twelve men on May 9th, 1637, to "lay forth the high ways of Plymouth, Duxbury, and Eel River."

In Duxbury, a jury was selected to establish the roadways for foot, horse and cart. The pathways included the road into the Nook; a "way"

now known as Surplus Street used to reach the marshes; and a road, long since abandoned that led from Henry Howland's property to the upper portion of Tremont Street. These pathways are seen in the Colony's Map of 1637.

Some historians argue that the history of Surplus Street as a significant pathway began even earlier than 1637 as it follows along an old Native American path used to reach the shorelines from

Pembroke. The first dwellers relied heavily on the well-established Native American pathways.

"It is very probable that most of these ways were paths of the red man which with the advent of the horse, were widened, straightened, and otherwise improved," according to Duxbury historian Henry Fish.

Duxbury's former town historian, Dorothy Wentworth, also believed life for the early settlers would have been very difficult if not for these "well worn trails." Clearing the land would have been tiresome and time consuming for the families who would have been "limited to water transportation."

Native Americans also used many waterways as a means of travel and for fishing and hunting. Such a waterway is still found on Surplus Street, although it is now no wider than a small brook, as seen in the photo below. It was once an important waterway used to travel from the Blue Fish River.

The Native American pathways not only provided a

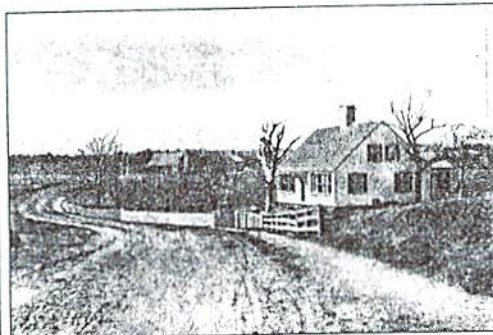


Photo courtesy of McMahon Family



This view of 112 Surplus Street has changed little since the turn of the century.

means of transportation for the first settlers, but also made hunting easier. Not surprising, a Native American pathway was always found in the best geographical location. Their pathways avoided hills whenever possible, and never went through a swamp. They also always crossed over streams at a narrow and shallow point, said Wentworth.

The Duxburrough Path, crossed over Surplus Street between two antique cape homes at 98 and 104 Surplus Street, and led to the Green Harbor Path which was a well-defined Indian Trail the Native Americans used each summer to reach their shore camps.

First Settlers...

Henry Fish spent four

years researching colony and town records, old maps, and scouring the old paths by foot. His discoveries are well documented in "Notes" completed in 1923.

Fish walked all the old paths, "time without number," he said, traveling through the hills, valleys, streams and swamps of Duxbury. On many of Fish's excursions he would visit the old abandoned cellars where the early settlers had "cut a hole in the wilderness to build a home." Surplus Street contains some of the oldest cellars that Fish visited on occasion.

"There are three cellars on the land that was once the lands of Peter Brown...one of them is just back of the present houses on Surplus Street."

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What's in a Name?

How did one of Duxbury's oldest roads get its name? For years, Surplus Street was simply a path known as "the road" which farmers used to get to the salt marshes. There are several theories how Surplus Street got its name, and they all lead us back to one event in American history -- The Federal Surplus Revenue Act of 1836.

But before "the road" became Surplus Street, it earned some nicknames along the way, all of which reveal a little something about Duxbury history.

While early land deeds refer to "the road", Surplus Street was at one time known by the unaccountable name of Folly Street, according to former town historian Dorothy Wentworth.

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Journey Down Surplus Street: In the Beginning

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Fish wrote.

Peter Brown was a Mayflower passenger and one of the first settlers to Duxbury. His first wife passed away early on, and he later married "Ye Widow Forde." The couple had three children. Unfortunately, Brown only lived a few years after settling along this cart way. Historians believe he is buried in the Chestnut Street graveyard.

Brown's lands were divided between the heirs and sold to Henry Samson, a Pilgrim.

Samson was said to have come from a "very numerous and respectable family." He arrived on the Mayflower, but was too young to be a signer of the compact, according to historian Justin Winsor.

Admitted as a freeman in 1637, Samson moved to Duxbury early on and by 1667 was allowed to seek

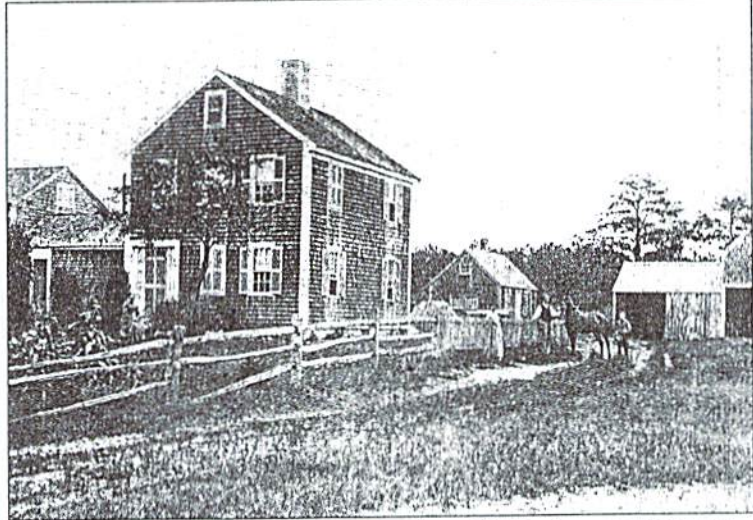
additional land for his large family.

He purchased some land from Eph'm Tinkham's widow, the daughter of Peter Brown, which was on the north side of the old cart way now called Surplus Street.

He also received a court grant of three lots "from the over plus of lands on the south of Henry Howlands...these lots were the lands now owned by the heirs of the late Joseph Soule and Clarence Taylor," noted Fish in 1923.

Henry Howland, a freeman, was one of Duxbury's earliest residents. He had substantial landholdings in Duxbury. His lands went southerly down to Surplus Street from the land which would later become the J.K. Parker Farm, and eventually the current Yacht Club Golf course.

"Two roads diverged in a



The Almshouse (c. 1818) on Depot Street near Surplus. The small building in rear was the Town Jail.

Photo courtesy of DR&HS.

yellow wood..."

Roadways once established tend to remain a permanent fixture since to make a

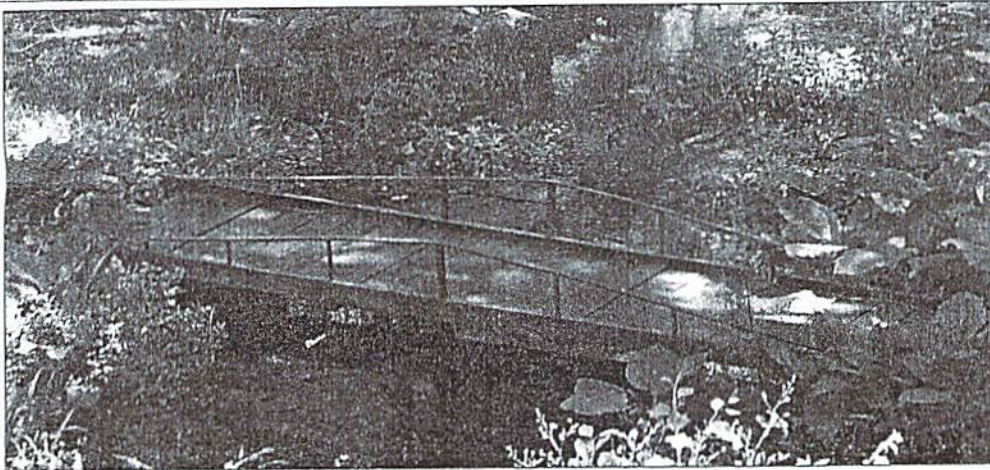
change would, as Fish noted, "bring hardship to those who first settled along the way."

There were, however,

some changes to Surplus Street over the years. For instance, the road once continued across Depot Street through the woods now known as Lapham Lot and owned and maintained by the Duxbury Rural & Historical Society (DR&HS). This old pathway can still be found on foot, eventually making a bend in the woods and reaching Tremont Street. It was known as the Hambleton Smith Grove. The tomb of Benjamin Smith is located on the southwest corner of this land.

This extension of Surplus Street is seen on maps as early as 1879 and was used to reach Duxbury's Third Meeting House. The Meeting House was used from 1785 to 1840 and was located "along Tremont Street at the northern

see next page



This brook on Surplus Street was a waterway used by the Native Americans to travel from the Blue Fish River.

What's in A Name?

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Surplus Street was also called "Poverty Lane" by many in town since the old pathway took one directly to the poor house. "Perhaps one's folly led one over the road to the almshouse?" noted Wentworth.

Once the Almshouse was built in 1818 near where Surplus crossed over Depot Street to reach the Third Meeting House, "the road" became known as "Almshouse Road" since it brought travellers directly to the poor house. Not far from the Poor House was the town jail. (See photos). This jailhouse was later moved behind the town hall off Tremont Street.

During the 19th century, the Almshouse was an integral part of the town, with the accounts and produce from the farm regularly listed in annual reports, according to town historian Kathy Pillsbury in her book, *Duxbury: A Guide*.

While the Almshouse provided a home and work for the less fortunate in town, the nickname

Street nor Poverty Lane was ever found on any town maps or land and house deeds, noted Wentworth.

Other nicknames associated with Surplus Street included "Hell's Corner" in the late 1700s for the corner of Surplus Street and Washington Street. This name is attributed to the federal style house, 4 Surplus Street, which operated as a boarding house for shipwrights at that time.

Wives and daughters of respectable citizens wanted escorts when they walked near the Surplus Street Corner. The area became known as Sodom, or where the wicked people lived, explained Wentworth.

In the late 1800s this same Federal home became an inn called The Cottage by the Sea. It was run by a Delano and in June of 1890, the Reverend Mr. Babcock from Baltimore summered here, transforming "Hell's Corner" into "Heaven's Corner," noted Margery MacMillan in her book *Stopping Places Along Duxbury Roads*.

The final answer to the origin of 360-year-old

administration when a federal surplus allowed Congress to enact the Surplus Revenue Act of 1836. This surplus money amounted to 36 million dollars and was to be "deposited" with the 26 states of the Union. The amount of money dispersed to each state was determined by their federal representation. It was to be paid in 1837 in four equal payments, but as Wentworth points out only three installments were actually made.

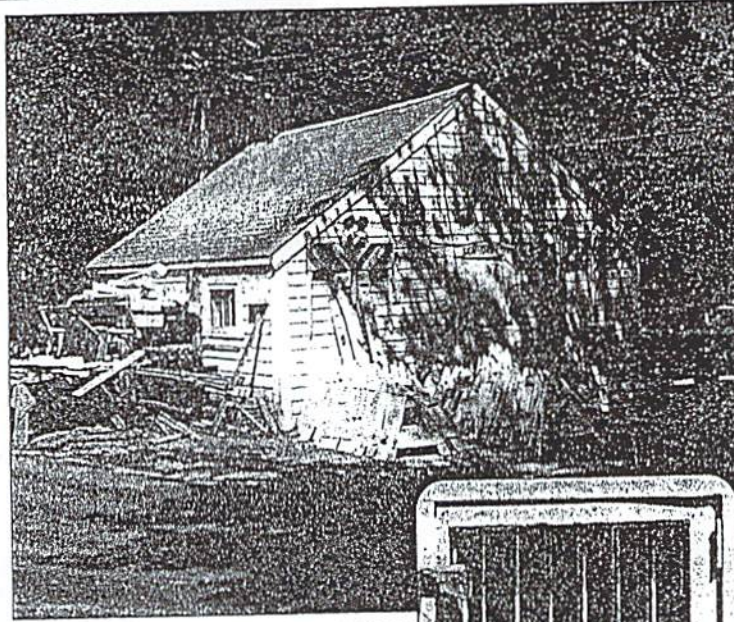
Massachusetts' share was \$1,338,173.58 and in January 1837 the legislature voted to 'deposit' the money with the towns in proportion to population, to be used for any purpose for which the towns usually spent tax money, said Wentworth.

It is believed that because Duxbury's share was used to improve Surplus Street, it was bestowed the name. Another side of the story is the residents were so intrigued by the Surplus funds, and talked so much about it, that the road got the name because it was "where those surplus people live."

Regardless of which theory you believe, what's in this name is certainly a connection to the

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The old town jail (above) is now used by the DPW, but remnants of its former life still remain. (right)

edge of the Mayflower Cemetery because that location was closer to the then center of town," noted town historian Katherine Pillsbury.

We can only speculate why this section of Surplus Street never became permanent. Perhaps once the town's activities moved from Tremont Street to what is now Hall's Corner, little travel occurred here and it returned to its original use as pasture and woods.

There was also another section of Surplus Street, near Ebenezer Wormald's homestead (currently 232 Surplus Street), which led to another part of Tremont Street. Like the extension to the Third Meeting House, this old path is also located on the Map of 1879 as part of Surplus Street,

and now included in land owned by the DR&HS.

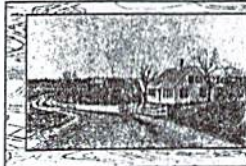
Wentworth once remarked at a DR&HS annual meeting how she "shuddered to think what would be now if the society had not had the foresight to preserve this land." Fortunately both paths still remain a part of the Surplus Street history thanks in part to this land preservation effort.

Forefathers and Foundations...

While roads usually remain permanent fixtures—becoming reliable means of use as they lead to homesteads, pastures, waterways, and meeting places—buildings do not always find the same fate. Duxbury boasts some of the most beautiful and abundant historical

homes in New England, but many of the earlier homesteads have not survived over the years. Little exists of the residences of Brown, Howland and Samson except for the depressions in the lands surrounding Surplus Street. Still these early settlers remain the forefathers of an area, which would become a thriving community along an old cart path and Native American trail.

Next in this series, we will discover the history behind the Surplus Street homes which have survived over the centuries. We will also examine the industries, which played a role in the development of the town, as we jour-



A Journey Down Surplus Street

PART II: SUCCESS, SECRETS & SODOM

By DEBORA BABIN KATZ



In part one of our series, we learned of the earliest times of Surplus Street, one of Duxbury's oldest pathways. We were introduced to the area's first settlers, Peter Brown, Henry Howland and Henry Samson, and discovered how the history of this pathway goes even further back to the times of the Native American. Now, as we journey down Surplus Street, stopping at its well-preserved homes, we will learn more about the people who worked and resided here. We will uncover family genealogies, and a variety of architectural philosophies. A pathway can be more than just a means of egress. It can lead us to family secrets, fascinating stories, and a wealth of town history, which once uncovered can draw and delight us for centuries.

-- D. B. Katz

Benjamin Bosworth House 4 Surplus Street

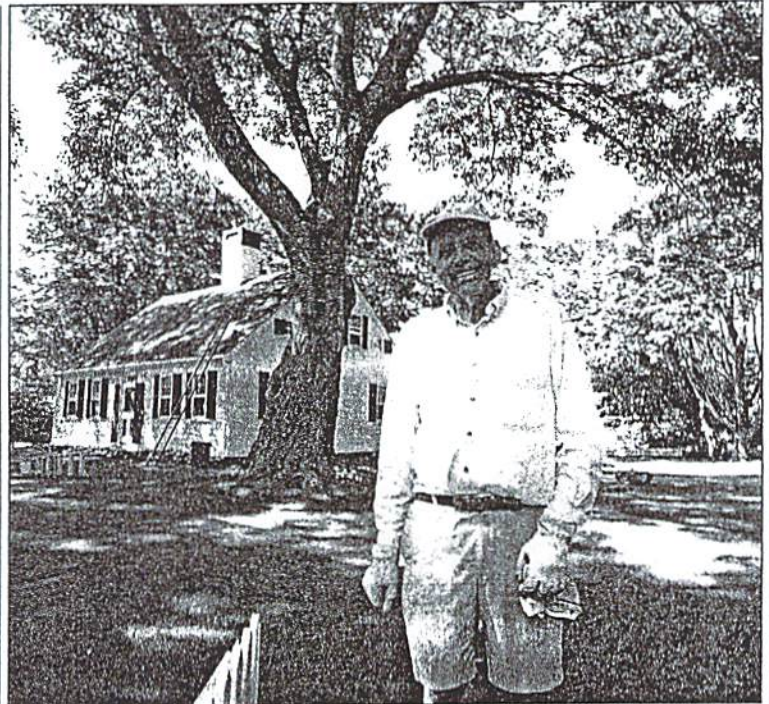
First in on our journey down Surplus Street is the Benjamin Bosworth House which sits facing south onto this once ancient cart path. You must picture this house without Washington Street running along the right side. When Bosworth built his lovely federal style home, Washington Street had not yet been built. It came into existence in 1798 and was first called Main Street.

The history of this residence begins well before the foundation was laid. It starts with Ebenezer Delano, known as Old King Eben, whose farm covered a large track of land that extended from Surplus Street, crossing over what would eventually become

Washington Street to the bay. In August 1794, Benjamin Bosworth purchased this house lot from Delano, who "towards the end of his long life sold his farm in bits and pieces," noted Dorothy Wentworth, a former town historian.

Bosworth married Mercy Prior in September 1791. Then in 1794, the couple moved into the house lovingly built by Benjamin

himself who was a house carpenter by trade. At the time they had two children, Abigail and Benjamin. Many more children would be born in the federal home, in the small bedroom off the center kitchen known as the barning room. It appears Bosworth was quite successful as a carpenter and was able to purchase the



Current homeowner Bill Riegel maintaining the Joseph S. Thomas House built in 1824. Tree in back is reported to be one of Duxbury's oldest living trees.

Photo by Michelle Babin

land and build a substantial home for his wife and children.

The two-story house has some special details to its architectural design. While the floor plan is consistent with other federal style homes of this period, Bosworth added a "mini-ell," which included the kitchen's large hearth fireplace and beehive stove instead of

locating it in the central chimney as was the tradition for this style house.

"It puts the builder apart from the general run of house carpenters," noted Wentworth.

Then in 1822, Bosworth sold the house and land to the Sampson brothers, Job, Henry and William all merchants in Duxbury for the handsome price of \$1,180. Only Henry resided in the house. The brothers were quite industrious, successful men who maintained a wharf, store, and trading business. The store they operated was located just north of the Bosworth lot.

From 1834 to 1868, Ezra Weston owned the Bosworth house. During the height of the shipbuilding industry, the home operated as a boarding house for those employed in the business.

The corner where Surplus Street intersects Washington Street was once known as 'Hell's Corner.' Duxbury residents called the area 'Sodom,' or 'where the wicked people lived.'

The nickname appears to have been well deserved as the respectable women and girls of Duxbury always requested "escorts" whenever they needed to walk near this section of Surplus Street.

"Not all of those who came to work in the thriving community were a credit to town...a

settlement," noted Wentworth.

Later the house was converted into a two family home. During the 1890s the house became a summer inn called *The Cottage by the Sea*, converting it from a boarding place for the brawling ship workers to a tranquil summer residence for the highly respectable.

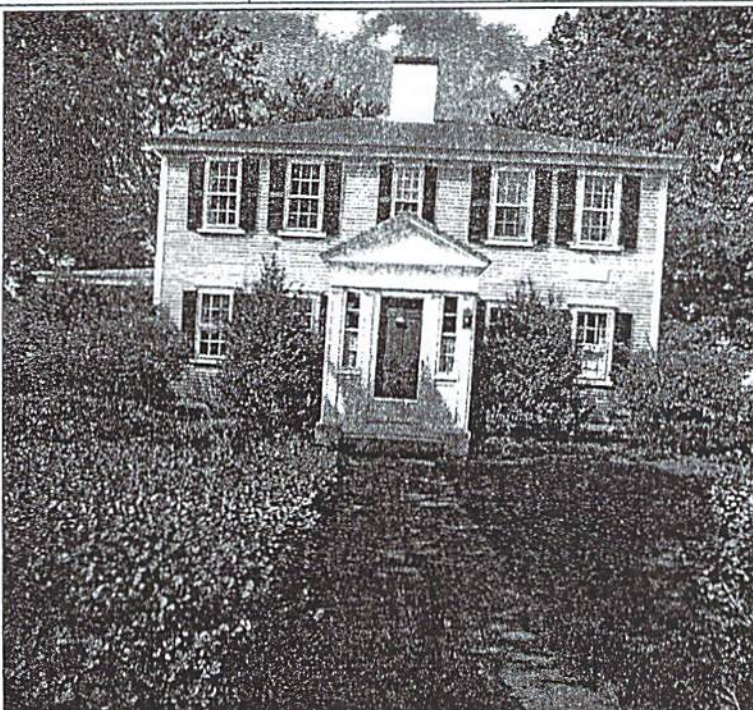
Joseph S. Thomas House 14 Surplus Street

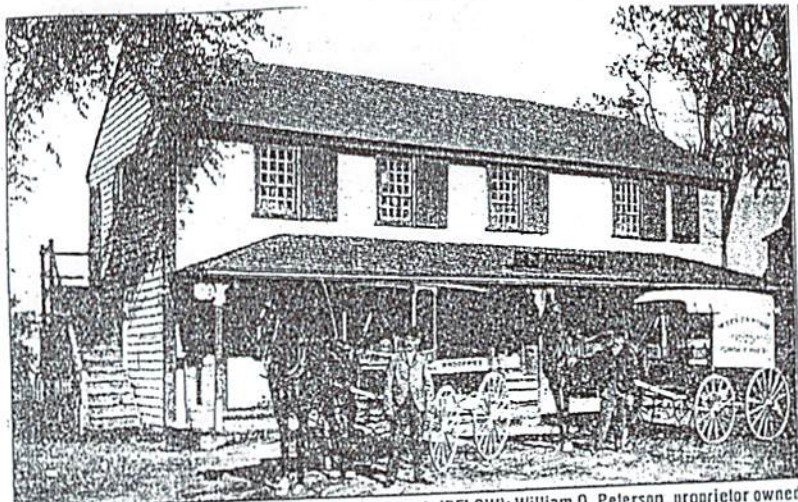
Walking by this lovely traditional cape with its two additional back ells and beautiful landscape (including one of Duxbury's oldest trees), a visitor would never expect that this house is part of an unsolved mystery. A mystery, which has never been solved by researcher or historian, and is likely to remain a family secret forever buried with Major Thomas, his wife Betsy, and his father-in-law Bradford Holmes.

In 1824 Bradford Holmes, a block maker by trade, bought this lot of land most likely as a wedding gift for his oldest daughter Betsy who planned to marry Major Joseph S. Thomas.

"Thomas was a veteran of the Mexican War, and (the couple) went to live in a new house he had built on his father-in-law's lot," noted Wentworth.

The house was conveniently located near Holmes' house at 32 Surplus Street, allowing the families to be near each other, and Holmes to see





(TOP): Peterson Store located at 318 Washington Street. (BELOW): William O. Peterson, proprietor owned the Joseph S. Thomas House on Surplus Street for twenty five years. Photo courtesy of DRAIS.

Thomas quickly added a blacksmith shop and coal house on the northern corner of the lot, which faced out to Bumblebee Lane, and went to work in his new business.

"It seemed like an ideal situation, new house, promising business, family near, but something went wrong," Wentworth wrote.

Within two years of living in their new home and one month after the birth of their first son, George, Betsy and Joseph Thomas picked up and left for a new home in Duxbury. Thomas sold the buildings - house and shop - to his father-in-law Bradford Holmes who still retained ownership of the land.

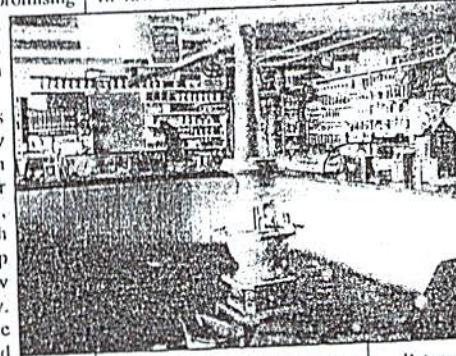
"Not even in family stories has there been any reason given for the sudden sale of the new house," said Wentworth.

As records show, Betsy remained in her father's will, but the couple never moved back, leaving what appeared to be an ideal place to raise a family and run a business. The mystery remains unsolved, but the house reveals a well-constructed Cape whose large center chimney still maintains 6 working fireplaces.

"The rooms are in the usual arrangement with 2 front rooms

either side of the front hall, a large kitchen across the rear, flanked by 2 small rooms," noted Wentworth.

Holmes, who had maintained ownership of the lot all along, purchased from his son-in-law the dwelling house,



blacksmith shop and coal house built by Thomas for \$400. He then turned around and sold part of the lot and dwelling house to Jonathan Gross for the same amount. Holmes decided to keep the blacksmith shop and the land it stood on.

Jonathan Gross made coffins for a living. "A prosperous business, but one wonders how it was so profitable when a coffin then sold for \$8," added Wentworth.

It would be Gross who built the additions to the house, including an older building for a new ell kitchen. This kitchen boasted a large fireplace and hearth, which included a brick

oven with iron door. He also built a shop to build his coffins.

During renovations to the home in 1935 several out buildings were torn down and a number of brass coffin ornaments came to light under the floorboards, explained architect Oliver Barker in 1935.

After almost fifty years of Gross ownership, Jonathan's son Willard Gross sold the property he had inherited for \$1,300 to William O. Peterson and his wife Mary who resided there for the next 25 years.

Peterson worked as a storekeeper in the local store just north of the house. Eventually he would purchase the business naming it "The Peterson Store"

Most of the exterior of the main house remains in tact as it did when Major Thomas built it for his new bride in 1824. The hand-hewn and sawn timbers of its frame endure while Betsy and Joseph's early abandonment of their lovely home and family business remain a secret and mystery to all.

Next in our series, we will visit a home which has remained in the same family since 1820 as we journey down one of Duxbury's oldest pathways.

